



Irving Browning Photo

## THE COST OF A FIVE-DOLLAR DRESS

BY FRANCES PERKINS

It hangs in the window of one of the little cash-and-carry stores that now line a street where fashionable New Yorkers used to drive out in their carriages to shop at Tiffany's and Constable's. It is a "supper dress" of silk crepe in "the new red," with medieval sleeves and graceful skirt. A cardboard tag on the shoulder reads: "Special \$4.95." Bargain basements and little ready-to-wear shops are filled with similar "specials." Ray, Mamie, Tilda, hurrying along Fourteenth Street to their jobs, snatch a minute in front of the window to gloat over the bright dress, priced within reach of modest purses. One of them will forego lunch to try it on and bear it off in triumph for her next date.

But the manufacturer who pays a living wage for a reasonable week's work under decent conditions cannot turn out attractive silk frocks to retail at five dollars or less. The price of the bargain dress is not paid by Tilda or Ray who wears it. The real cost is borne by the workers in the sweatshops that are springing up in hard-pressed communities. Under today's desperate need for work and wages, girls and women are found toiling overtime at power machines and work tables, some of them for paychecks that, like the one reproduced, represent a wage of less than ten cents a day.

It is of such a factory that a girl who is afraid to sign her name writes me, as New York state industrial commissioner, in the letter reproduced on page 77:

I am working in — at —. We have to be in at 7 a.m. work to 12 then 1 to 5 o'clock. . . . They also refuse to tell you the prices. When you receive your slip you are mark \$2.75 for five days and a half. Some received \$1.78. some \$.95. You never see your working slip. . . . I have read a piece in the — Advertiser. To write you in person. I hope you be able to help the working girls of this place.

For her fifty-hour week, this girl was paid at the rate of about five and a half cents an hour. Her fellow-worker, whose pay envelop contained \$1.78 worked for a trifle over three and a half cents an hour. Another worker writes:

At — Mills located at — the women employes as well as the male are required to work from 8 in the morning until 9 or 10 in the evening. On Saturday these hours hold good, too. We even have to work sometimes on Sunday. . . . No one in the factory dares to complain. Since times are so bad no one does complain.

Forty years ago, Lillian D. Wald and her associates at the Henry Street Settlement, the Hull-House group in Chicago, the organizers of the National Consumers' League and of the Women's Trade Union League were horrified by the hours, wages and working conditions endured by women in the garment trades. Partly through an aroused public conscience, partly through the development of modern concepts of sanitation and efficiency, we have in the last decades built up standards which we thought had banished the sweatshop from our industrial picture. The labor laws of manufacturing states, except in the most backward sections, express the conviction of the public, of organized labor and of leading factory owners that if industry is to prosper, the worker must not be exposed to excessive hours

If your clothes' budget has been cut down and you buy bargain dresses, it is only fair you should know who pays part of your bill—the women who made the dress. The New York State industrial commissioner tells what is happening in the "runaway" sweatshops and to employers who maintain standards. And she points to some remedies and safeguards.



of work, to unsanitary surroundings or to processes endangering health and safety. Provisions for factory inspection and penalties for infringement put teeth in these labor laws.

Today we are not faced with the destruction of all this good work. People speak of "the breakdown of standards" as though the whole structure had toppled. What has really happened is a breach in the wall where it has always been weak. For the informed and conscientious employer has always had to compete with the shortsighted manufacturer who tries to evade the labor law, cuts wages, resorts to contract labor and homework, thinks only of quick profits, never of the long-range welfare of the industry. The great body of American employers want to maintain industrial standards and their faith in the principle is reinforced by experience which has proved to them that, in the long run, the level of efficiency "good business" demands cannot be sustained by employees whose well-being is undermined by long hours and inadequate wages. It is because of this attitude on the part of employers that wage levels were maintained during 1930 and 1931.

Hitherto, at the first sign of "hard times" wage rates have immediately dropped. But for the first time in our economic history, we have today large groups of employers who understand that security for themselves and for the country depends on building up the purchasing power of the wage-earners. They want to pay high wages, and there are enough of them to make it false to suppose that standards have broken down. The sweatshop employer is offending against industry's standards, as well as against the standards of the community. But the employer who, in order to pay fair wages for reasonable hours of work, produces dresses in his shop to retail at \$9.50, finds himself in competition with the less conscientious manufacturer whose "sweated" garments are offered at \$4.95.

As we have come to know him in New York, this sweatshop proprietor is a "little fellow," doing business on a shoestring. He must make a quick turnover or go under. Since he cannot hope to meet union conditions or the requirements of the labor law, he goes to some outlying suburb where garment factories are not a feature of the local picture and where state inspectors are not on the lookout for him. Or perhaps he goes to a nearby state—New Jersey, Connecticut, Pennsylvania, Massachusetts—where he believes labor laws are less stringent or that he will escape attention. The goods he makes up are probably cut in a city shop and "bootlegged" to him by truck. His operations are minutely subdivided so that they can be quickly learned and require little skill. His force is made up of wives and daughters of local wage-earners who have been out of work for months or even years and whose family situation is

desperate. The boss sets the wage rates, figures the pay slips, determines the hours of work. His reply to any complaint is, "Quit if you don't like it."

The Massachusetts Commissioner of Labor and Industries, in a survey of wages paid in Fall River, reports these hourly rates in one of the women's apparel plants:

9 employees at 10¢ an hour  
1 employee at 11¢ an hour  
5 employees at 12½¢ an hour  
4 employees at 14½¢ an hour  
5 employees at 16¢ an hour

In another plant making wearing apparel "the earnings of more than 50 percent of the women and girls employed on piece work" were as follows:

employee at 5¢ an hour  
1 employee at 6¢ an hour  
3 employees at 7¢ an hour  
2 employees at 8¢ an hour  
10 employees at 9¢ an hour  
9 employees at 10¢ an hour  
12 employees at 11¢ an hour  
10 employees at 12½¢ an hour  
13 employees at 13½¢ an hour  
18 employees at 14¢ an hour  
13 employees at 15¢ an hour

The report adds: "Assuming constant activity by those workers during the forty-eight hours of the plant's operation, the weekly earnings of the highest paid workers in the group just cited, namely, those earning 15 cents an hour, would have been \$7.20."

The factories whose payrolls were studied in this survey had come to Fall River from New York and elsewhere, Commissioner Smith points out, "under the double lure of cheap rentals to be found in the discontinued textile mills and a surplus of unemployed female labor, mostly young unskilled girls." And he comments, "These plants are for the most part in charge of men of inferior business caliber, who probably could not survive at all if it were not for their willingness to be entirely ruthless in exploiting labor."

A woman reporter, sent to Fall River to report on condi-

tions for the Boston Record saw smoke coming from the chimney of an apparently deserted factory. Pushing open a door she found herself in a dark and apparently deserted old building. But she heard machines whirring somewhere, groped her way to the fourth floor, and in a dimly lighted loft found nearly a hundred girls at sewing machines and work tables. The reporter, posing as a job applicant, was offered work at a wage of 30 cents for a ten-hour day.

The Monthly Bulletin of the Pennsylvania Department of Labor and Industry reports the payment of wages as low as \$3 for a 51-hour week in some small shops. In a "runaway" contract shop that had moved from New York City to New Haven, Connecticut, the U. S. Women's Bureau found median earnings between \$4 and \$5 for a full week's work.

*At Mills,  
Inc., located at  
the women employees  
as well as the male employees.  
are required to work from  
8 in the morning until 9 or 10  
in the evening. On Saturday the  
hours hold good, too. We have  
have to work sometimes on  
Sunday. This, it seems to me,  
is against public policy, laws,  
labor regulations. No one in the  
factory dares to complain, since  
times are so bad no one does com-  
plain. However, such long hours  
are very painful. Therefore, I ask  
you to investigate the above named  
place to your own satisfaction and  
to see what you can do. I thank you.  
An employee.*

The card above, the note opposite typify the pleas Miss Perkins gets from sweated workers



If wage levels in the more orderly industries are charted against the falling cost of living an approximate relationship is apparent. But wages in these "pirate" concerns have nothing to do with the change in living costs.

Between the lines of some of the letters that come to the State Labor Department these days one gets a picture of what it means to try to make both ends meet on such wages. One girl, residing in a city with high living costs, wrote:

We were getting \$15 a week for a salary and got along very well, the firm took off \$2 making \$13 well a half loaf is better than nothing. But they had the audacity to reduce us again 10 percent from the \$13 making our pay \$11.70 . . . we have to pay for all holidays so you see we have not even \$11.70 a week. The very least you can get board is \$8, some have to pay carfare, when it is stormy you must pay two . . . if you only add up what I and many others do live on, not even the price of shoes, you may think it is exaggerated, no it is the gospel truth, and I don't hesitate to tell you it is the ———.

Another worker writes, "It is enough to drive girls insane. Cannot get the necessities of life when board is taken out and worse still when a holiday comes along."

In spite of widespread unemployment, many of these "marginal" manufacturers are increasing the working day and the working week. Sometimes hours are lengthened while wages remain the same. More often, wages are reduced and hours of work lengthened. Legal standards, established slowly over a period of many years for the protection of women and girls in industry, are being disregarded by these "pirate employers." The State Labor Department receives

MERCER TROUSER COMPANY, INC. 108 FACTORY ST. TRENTON, N. J.	#112	TRENTON, N. J.	September 15th	1932	No. 96
	PAY TO THE ORDER OF HELEN BAMBO \$1.00				
	ONE ———— and ———— DOLLARS				
	Payroll account Paid in full				
MERCER TROUSER COMPANY, INC. <i>Dorothea Weiss</i> SECRETARY					

Starvation wages received by an experienced garment worker for two weeks with overtime, whose pay check came into the possession of the National Consumers' League

letters describing work-days of ten, eleven and even twelve hours, work on Sunday and no day of rest, overtime without extra pay. The worker who ventures to protest is reminded of the dozens of girls eager to have her job, or is simply "fired."

Here, for instance, is an anonymous letter sent to the industrial commissioner:

I am writing to you because I think something ought to be done about young girls under working age, working at night at ———. I know I worked there and was fired because I wouldn't work Sundays. . . . Now they are working overtime. . . . The girls don't want to work late but they are told if they don't work overtime or Sundays they can stay at home. Its either work or lose their positions. I hope you will look into this matter.

The inspector found sixteen girls working illegally long hours and evidence for prosecution was obtained.

A girls' welfare organization wrote:

We wish to report the firm of ——— at ——— Street. Numerous girls report the long working hours. . . . Saturdays they are supposed to work until one, but invariably the girls work until 5 p.m. or later. This overtime is absolutely compulsory and the girls who refuse are discharged.

An inspection sustained this complaint and prosecution was instituted.

In Connecticut, where the labor standards under the law are lower than in New York, a 10-hour day and 55-hour week are allowed. Investigators for the U. S. Women's Bureau in their preliminary report on the sewing trades in that state give the hours worked by something less than two thirds of the 7631 women included in the study. They state: "Over 1000 women but less than a fourth of the total [for whom hours data are available] worked less than 40 hours during the week . . . and this group undoubtedly is representative of the undertime . . . due in large part to the depression. . . . It is surprising to find at the other extreme that 665 women worked as long as 52 hours or more, in some cases excessively long hours, and in a few cases had continued even through seven days of the week. The dress factories were outstandingly responsible for such long hours."

They found that the largest groups of women with long hours were either hand-sewers or power-machine operators, "many women working as much as 60 or 65 hours. Two women had worked more than 70 hours in the week recorded."

Working conditions, including safety provisions, sanitation, rest room facilities and so on, are, like standards of wages and hours, holding up well in responsible concerns. In the runaway shop conditions are usually far below standard and the picture of such

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*in at 7 A.M. work to 12-12-11  
clock. The prices are very low,  
we have to do 24 seams at 12-12-11  
into a dozen, and change  
cotton, about 6 times. I can't  
color. Then you have to wash  
up and then I can't go to  
times a day to get work, then  
go and then I can't go to  
refuse to tell you the price.*

*When you received your slip you  
are worth \$2.75 for five days work  
half. Some received \$1.75 some \$1.50  
You never see your working  
slip. It is never given out. I have  
seen it and I know it is not right.*



a plant is a look back to the sweatshops that horrified case workers and visiting nurses at the turn of the century. In the contract shops that spring up and often vanish before the community realizes they are there, no one takes thought for the comfort or safety of the worker. The shops are practically always dirty, ill-ventilated, half-heated lofts or abandoned factories. The working equipment is unsatisfactory. Toilet facilities are filthy and inadequate, lunches must be hurriedly eaten at the machines or work tables, the lighting is poor, especially for hand processes, the seating arrangements bad, a restroom or even a cloakroom an unconsidered luxury.

What is the way out for the conscientious consumer who does not want to buy garments, even at a bargain, made by exploited labor? Common sense will tell the purchaser that someone must pay the price of the well-cut silk dress offered at \$4.95. The manufacturer is not producing these frocks for pleasure or for charity. If the purchaser does not pay a price that allows for a subsistence wage and reasonable hours and working conditions, then the cost of the "bargain" must be sweated out of the workers.

**B**UT in hard times it is perhaps asking too much of the consumer to hope that he (or she) will refuse to purchase "specially priced" clothing as a protest against sweatshop products.

A more dependable protection for the worker is, of course, an adequate labor law, vigorously enforced. There is urgent need for governmental economy in the year we face. But no state can afford at this time to relax enforcement of its labor law. This means an increased rather than a diminished force of competent inspectors, adequate supervision, facilities for special investigations and reports where need for them is indicated, adequate clerical and statistical assistance to keep the work of the bureau on a high level of effectiveness. The present situation has illumined the need in some states for an overhauling of the labor law and for more adequate enforcement machinery. There is an economic as well as a social gain involved here. Our actual dollars-and-cents load will be lighter even if we have to issue bonds and spread the cost of a strengthened labor department over future years, if we uphold industrial standards. For in the wake of the sweatshop comes an inevitable train of child dependency and delinquency, illness and old age for which, on debased wages, no provision can be made.

In addition to weak spots in present labor statutes, the hard times are giving us a sharp lesson in the need for enlarging our whole scheme of protective legislation to include minimum-wage laws. Hours standards are holding up better than wage standards because we have reinforced them with mandatory laws. In our industrial civilization, similar legislation to safeguard the health of the worker not only against excessive hours of work but also against a less-than-subsistence wage is socially necessary. It is important

to the community, as well as to the employee, that men and women be protected against "starvation wages." Not only is the well-being of the worker and his family endangered, but as a purchaser he is limited to the most meager necessities. He can contribute nothing to community prosperity and must usually turn to relief agencies to supplement his inadequate earnings. Supreme Court decisions have slowed up the minimum-wage movement in this country. I am convinced that basically such legislation is in harmony with the principles of our constitution.

The problem of maintaining industrial standards not only calls for more adequate legislation and enforcement, but for greater care in affording credit facilities for new enterprises. Banks and loan agencies, in underwriting a new undertaking, are careful to inquire about the factory site and invariably refuse to float a project to be housed in a structure that violates the building code. If it is unwise to advance credit to the manufacturer who proposes to economize by utilizing an outworn or shoddy building it would seem even more necessary to discourage a project that rests on the discredited practice of exploitation.

There is widespread public concern with the present threat to industrial standards. The National Consumers' League took the lead in December in calling together representatives of organized labor, state labor departments, the Y's, the League of Women Voters, the Council of Jewish Women, the federated clubs, the churches, the social agencies and kindred groups, who met in a two-day conference in New York. The gathering heard reports of current conditions in many industrial communities and adopted "a program for concerted action." The individuals present pledged themselves to "initiate the formation in their state of an Industrial Standards Committee." Such a committee will wherever organized serve as a clearing-house of information and as a spearhead for action in enforcement of hours law, in bringing the hours law for women up to a common standard of an eight-hour day and a forty-four hour week, and in urging the early passage of a mandatory minimum-wage law. A meeting to form such a committee in New York is being arranged at this writing. Here is not "just another committee" but a focus of sentiment and information that will serve to rally and to educate the community to deal with the problem in the several states.

**T**HE job at hand is a slow, undramatic, long-range effort. For in the end, the safety of our industrial standards rests with an informed public opinion ranged in support of protective legislation and the work of the state labor department in enforcing it. The red silk bargain dress in the shop window is a danger signal. It is a warning of the return of the sweatshop, a challenge to us all to reinforce the gains we have made in our long and difficult progress toward a civilized industrial order.

**Representatives of more than fifty organizations met in New York January 10 and voted to set up a state industrial standards committee. The first work of the committee will be to draft bills providing a 44-hour week and a minimum wage for women and child workers, to be introduced this month. The minimum wage movement is now under way in twelve states, including Connecticut, Pennsylvania and New Jersey.**